



# Story by Beth Reece Photos by Gary L. Kieffer

WO years ago soldiers based in Larissa, Greece, worked from cardboard "desks" in makeshift offices. Conditions have since improved, but change has come slowly.

"Our lives have gotten better, but progress has come in baby steps," said SSG Sharon Forde, an administrative specialist who has watched her unit grow from a handful to 140 members.

She and fellow pioneer-soldiers have helped found NATO's new Joint Sub-Regional Command, South Central. Among military personnel from nine nations, and in a country still warming up to the presence of Americans, they are promoting peace in southern Europe from NATO's only permanent land-component headquarters in the Balkans.

The strain of building their unit from scratch is fading, but soldiers stationed in Larissa can remember when they operated without e-mail, office furniture and the luxuries of home. The facility still lacks a commissary, chapel, post exchange and American doctors, but the soldiers don't grumble.

"We've come to Greece with a lot of motivation and expertise," said SFC John Lomax. "Everybody here contributes to making this a better place to live and work."

Peace and War

The JSRC can be activated to respond to events ranging from fires and earthquakes to combat. In war, the command would take charge of several

ground elements, including a Greek corps and a NATO rapid-reaction force.

In peace, the soldiers plot defense strategies for northern Greece, fine-tuning their tactical skills through Partnership for Peace exercises that bring together soldiers from some 20 nations. Training focuses on the complexities of escort operations, crowd control, search and rescue, and rules of engagement.

"This is reality. Much of the U.S. military's future role is going to be supporting peace and maintaining order," said LTC Gerd Wilhelm, chief of JSRC's Joint Operations Support Section.

Since peacetime rules of engagement are more restrictive, soldiers must relinquish the "destroy-the-enemy" mentality that is appropriate in wartime, Wilhelm said. "Soldiers obviously have the right to defend themselves, but even in a riot they usually wouldn't be authorized to fire their weapons."

Åbout 10 percent of Larissa's soldiers are regularly deployed to Macedonia or Kosovo to

work in planning, intelligence and communications cells. Handfuls have also deployed to Kosovo to lay out telephone and data lines.

SPC Jose Alacan often chauffeurs soldiers and VIPs to Kosovo. Driving in that strife-torn region is a delicate job, he said, recalling incidents when he's had to brave rocks thrown by angry locals. Even the Greek capital, Athens, is now considered dangerous for military drivers and passengers since a British officer was killed there last year.





The Joint Sub-Regional Command, South Central, in Larissa, Greece, is home to service members from nine nations.

"No matter where or who I'm driving, passenger safety is in my hands," Alacan said.

## The Vital Link

"Communication is vital to NATO leaders. They must communicate in order to understand each other and work effectively together. It's our job to make sure that they can," said MSG Steven Gerding, networks squadron chief and senior



NCO for the JSRC's Allied Signals Group.

The ASG operates a range of communication systems telephones,

computers, e-mail. switching networks, data processing and cryptography.

"Sometimes our soldiers have to figure out how the systems work before they've completed training on those systems," Gerding said. "Once we acquire a knowledge base, we pass

"Most people don't know the Army is in Greece until they get orders to come here." said CPT Pete Booker. commander of the JSRC's U.S. Army Flement.

it on, but getting started and becoming more familiar with the equipment has been difficult. It's almost like someone iust said: 'Here's vour new command. Enjoy it."

Building and sustaining the current communications framework has been virtually a full-time job, Gerding said, but ASG soldiers have also been looking to the future. Plans call for the Larissa of 2005 to be triple its current size. A proposed four-story building will have spaces for server rooms and telephone distribution points. By then,



Raymond Duggan, shipped from the U.S.

computer lines will also increase from the current 200 to more than 300.

"A year ago there wasn't a lot happening here. Without us, I believe this headquarters probably couldn't operate," Gerding said. "Americans are great about coming into a place and understanding their role, then getting right down to business."

# Making Do

Rule number one: Live like a Greek, Soldiers in Larissa do without the facilities and services usually available on Army installations. They buy clothes and groceries off post, live off post, even pay their bills off post.

"Most people don't know the Army is in Greece until they get orders to come here," said CPT Pete Booker, commander of the JSRC's U.S. Army Element.

There may never be enough soldiers stationed in Larissa to warrant a full-service chapel or movie theater. But the USNSE lightens some burdens with housing referral and administrative support, a shoppette and a small medical clinic.

Greek housing specialists help soldiers find lodging. And while most rents in the area are well within soldiers' maximum allowances, the Greek employees also negotiate costs between renters and buyers.

"We are very remote." Booker said, "but we try to make things as comfortable as possible."

Detergents, greeting cards and American candy bars are among the desired goods available at the base's mini-shoppette, which is closed on weekends and after 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, Manager Wayne Arnold hopes to eventually triple the size of his business, but he'll still have to send customers off-post for most necessities.

The base's health clinic provides routine medical care. For emergency or dental care, soldiers and families must turn to off-post, TRICAREapproved providers. The good news is that Larissa-based soldiers aren't subject to TRICARE fees and copayments.

Soldiers deploying four hours north to the Macedonian border must detour through the JSRC's regional headquarters in Naples, Italy, for equipment and immunizations.

As in any company headquarters, admin specialists update personnel and training records, handle pay inquiries, monitor performance evaluations, and file such personnel actions as extensions and leave

The USNSE is currently testing a

Technicians SSG Steve Freeman and SPC Eric Morey remove one of JSRC's many computer servers for a diagnostic ioint-services admin concept that would allow admin clerks to crosstrain on each service's standard operating procedures and formats, so they can answer questions ranging from finance to training requirements for any of the military services.

"NATO has a multinational. multiservice philosophy," Booker said. "We want to act as a cohesive team and be able to help the other services if their admin clerks are on leave or TDY. We're too small a group not to support one another."

#### Torce Protection

Complacent soldiers who pay no attention to what's going on around them can be prime targets of anti-American aggression, said Navy Chief

Warrant Officer Tom Allyn, who heads the JSRC's force-protection program. Anyone who represents democracy

can become a target. Allyn said, U.S. service members in Greece are barred from wearing uniforms off post, and each carries a government-issue cell phone that links directly to English-speaking law enforcement and



medical personnel. Security guards patrol soldiers' residences twice a day more when the risks of a terrorist attack increase. Allyn also sends personnel to keep a watchful eye on soldiers travelling around town

> "Later, we'll bring the soldiers in and talk to them about their habits," Allyn said. Then come the snapshots taken with hidden cameras, "It makes people realize how easy it is for terrorists to watch or target

**MSG Larry Johnson** and a Greek civilian. Kosta Diamantis. transfer a logistics database from logbook to computer.





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them," he said. Are such measures extreme or unnecessarily intimidating? "There are people out there who

would like to kill us, not because of anything we've done, but because of who they think we are," Allyn said.

#### Common Threads

"We have military members from nine nations here at Larissa - people of diverse cultures and backgrounds and if we can get them to work around

the table together to solve a problem, then I think we've been exceptionally successful." Wilhelm said.

Compromise is an obvious requirement in a joint environment, where people with varied backgrounds merge, "We get so narrow-minded within our own services. We even have different ideas about how to spend money," said ASG Deputy Commander LTC Karen Dixon, "But a common desire for peace - as well as the facility's close confines - unites those who work here."

"We recognize each other as human beings in spite of our differences," Wilhelm said, "You can't change mindsets overnight, but there wouldn't be so many problems and so much hate in the world if everyone appreciated each other like we do in NATO." □



SFC Phoebe Heidelberg picks up a few things at the AAFES shoppette, the only American shopping facility on Larissa's NATO compound.

### Tamily Life in Larissa

HEY miss marshmallows, mayonnaise and bagels. Once called "The Spouses" of Larissa, Greece, today they are the Family Readiness Group, gradually catching on to life in a foreign land.

"People ask me where to find peanut butter or develop film," said Veronika Lancaster, "We all had the same questions when we arrived, so we don't let anvone feel like they're asking something silly."

Families weren't allowed to accompany the first soldiers to arrive at NATO's new Joint Sub-Regional Command, South Central. As the unit grew, the JSRC's U.S. National Support Element commander. CPT Pete Booker, began steering soldiers toward two-year, family accompanied tours.

But setting up house in Larissa hasn't been easy. Spouses have had to culti-

vate skills they haven't needed on other, more "Americanized" overseas installa-

"We have to show people how to make it in a place where nobody speaks our language. Something as simple as grocery shopping is very different here than it is back home, where you know what everything is and can read the ingredients," said FRG member Teresa Booker.

She recalls when a search for vanilla pudding seemed more like a scavenger hunt. "Who would think that the package would have an ear of corn on it?" she said. Isolation connects people in odd ways

- like when Larissa's small shoppette stocks a new item. "When something new comes in we all call each other up. But we always remind each other that we have to share, so we take only one," said Kathy Swartwood.

In the beginning, when dependents were few, boredom was the big joke. They'd say, "Call me anytime, It's not like I'll be doing anything." But more than 100 dependents now live in Larissa, Lancaster said, and none of them sits around sipping coffee.

"As soon as new people adjust, they start asking what they can do to help everybody else, whether it's with

Godparents Veronika Lancaster and Athanasios Mitsoglou look on as Navy Lt. Cmdr. Philip B. Creider blesses Ariana Langowski, the first American baby born in Larissa.

child care or just showing newcomers. where to go," Lancaster said. "We've become family, and that makes us all feel comfortable here. It doesn't matter so much anymore that this is a remote assignment "

Children have their own adjustments to make. The Department of Defense school offers only kindergarten through 8th grade, and is broken down into three classrooms - kindergarten through 2ndgrade, 3rd through 5th grades and 6th through 8th grades. After 8th grade, parents may send their children to boarding schools in London

or to Pinewood, an international school located two hours north of Larissa

Though the school in Larissa is open to all nationalities, classes are taught in English. Principal Don Christensen believes the multi-age environment gives students a broad tolerance for other opinions and cultural mannerisms.

"It's very different from going to school in the states, where differences are only marginal." he said. "Here, the students are so diverse, but they enjoy interacting with one another."

Babies are also welcome in Larissa although there are no American doctors present to deliver them. MAJ Tom and Suzanna Langowski didn't know they were having a baby until they'd arrived in Greece.

"We were nervous about having a Greek doctor, but it didn't take us long to realize

# Exploring Greece's Past and Present

#### Story by Beth Reece Photos by Gary L. Kieffer

Kathy Swartwood buys

many outdoor markets.

experience for us."

Langowski's baby girl.

grapes at one of Greece's

that communication wouldn't be a prob-

lem, since our doctor spoke English," said

Suzanna, mother of the first American

baby born in Larissa, "It was an amazing

Greece less troublesome and more re-

laxed, said Lancaster, godmother of the

we're from, whether we're officer or en-

listed, we go through this together," she

said. "And everything we do to help one

another will benefit families that come

here long after we leave." - Beth Reece

Friendship alone has made living in

"It doesn't matter who we are or where

F life is a game, the Greeks play it well. The Olympics, drama, music. art, mythology, philosophy - all were important in ancient Greece. And life in this Mediterranean land is still a contest of what to see and do first, of whether to explore history or find refuge in slow-paced mountain towns.

"Where else can you watch a live performance in a 2.000-year-old amphitheater?" said Jennifer Foster, the director of morale, welfare and recreation for soldiers assigned to NATO's Joint Sub-Regional Command, South Central, in Larissa.

Marble and bronze relics remain as proof of lavish temples and classic architecture. Timeworn villages still come alive with flashy markets and vendors peddling produce, fresh

bread, seafood, clothes and rugs.



Where Socrates once roamed. SFC John Lomax has followed. He's visited Athens 10 times in 15 months, and has also toured Delphi, Thessaloniki and the Greek islands.

"When I first heard soldiers were needed in Greece, I knew I wanted to volunteer," he said. "I've enjoyed everything about this country - even just sitting in the town square watching people walk

Athens seduces visitors with the grandeur of its ancient architecture. At the peak of the 2,500-year-old Acropolis, the Parthenon sits solidly in place. The temple was built to house a gold and ivory statue of the goddess Athena, believed to be the protector of Greek cities.

SPC Jose Alacan marvels at the ancient architecture and is fascinated by Greek culture. He relishes the hot summers and mild winters and knows that, with beaches to surf and mountains to ski, residents and tourists alike steep rocks, which have the best of two worlds.



Meteora is a "stone forest" that has been home to monasteries since the 11th century, when the only way up the steep inclines was by ladder or baskets.

So packed are the coasts in summertime that bodies and umbrellas hide the white sand, SSG Samara Pitre abandons the beach for the deep, blue sea, "This is something I've always wanted to do," Pitre said, strapping on scuba gear for an hour's adventure.

An other-worldly calm pervades the "stone forest" of Meteora, an oasis for

Orthodox monks since the 11th century, Serene monasteries sit atop monks once ascended by ladder or in baskets but visitors may now







timony of the country's glorious past. (Above) The sea surrounds Greece. It's white sandy beaches attract tourists and natives throughout the country's steamy summers.

climb by car or on foot.

Postcards are as rare as tacky souvenirs in the cotton town of Larissa. Athens is a four-hour drive south and Thessaloniki is two hours north. The

coast is 45 minutes away. The absence of tourism is perhaps one of Larissa's greatest attractions, as it provides those who do visit with a more realistic taste of authentic Greece.

The MWR office in Larissa sponsors tours to Meteora, Thessaloniki, Delphi and various islands.

Trips are also planned to bowling alleys, movie theaters and amusement parks.

"Americans here truly want to experience what's outside the gate. Being comfortable with the language definitely makes it easier," said Foster. MWR offers Greek classes for both beginners and advanced students.

The Greek alphabet can intimidate English speakers who are used to the grammatical rules of their native language. But young Greeks study English in school, and they often welcome the chance to test their skills by giving directions and translating menus for confused tourists.

"But what's the point of going to another country if you're not going to relish it?" said LTC Gerd Wilhelm. The single parent passes warm, slow evenings at Larissa's outdoor cafés, joined by his 20-year-old daughter, who was so enchanted during a visit to said CPT Pete Booker. "The Greeks Greece that she decided to stay.

Locals still indulge in leisurely. late-night strolls, and linger for hours in outdoor cafes. Families are priorities, and work is a trivial concern when shop owners lock their doors between 2 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. daily, reopening only on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

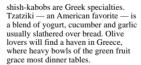


The cradle of Western civilization, Greece still clings to its traditions, espe-

cially in mountain-side towns that are remote from bustling cities.

Supper is a twilight affair in Greece. Tablecloths and menus are usually not arranged before 8 p.m., and doors rarely open before 8:30.

"If you've finished eating before 9 p.m. it's obvious you're American," definitely like to take their time over dinner. It's a social event for them."



Scuba diving is a favorite pastime for soldiers sta-

tioned in Larissa, which is just 45 minutes from the nearest beach.

Although local supermarkets do have small American-food sections, Greeks cook from scratch, so shelves are devoid of such packaged foods as mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese. "The Greeks seem to think that our diet consists of ranch dressing, peanut butter and pancake mix." Booker said.

Ouzo — a licorice liqueur — is the national drink. Most towns have a local version so intoxicating it's usually diluted in water. And Metaxa, a fiery

brandy, is popular throughout the



Patience is a virtue for travelers who have yet to adopt Greece's leisure pace. Tardiness is customary, as is the inclination to share, said SSG Sharon Forde.

When Forde's Greek neighbors come to her door, it's often with fruit or a hot pie. "And every time they go to the market, they ask if I need anything or if I'd like to go along," she and so friendly," he said. said.

Veronika Lancaster had lived in Larissa less than a month when a girl she had spoken with only a few times

(Above) A typical street in modern Greece. (Above left) Visitors to Meteora experience the quiet beauty of 60,000-year-old rock formations, atop which monks are known to stay for months in meditation and prayer.

at the local florist surprised her with a

gift and a note handwritten in English.

"She wrote that she really enjoyed our friendship. That was touching beyond anything I ever expected," Lancaster said. "They're such accommodating people. If you're looking for something downtown and can't find it, they'll take you to the place you need to go to get it."

Though MSG Larry Johnson has lived in Europe off and on for almost 10 years, Greece has renewed his sense of adventure. He can't decide whether it's the warmth of the people, the tangible traces of history, or the chance to slow down - but within weeks of his arrival, Johnson had fallen in love with the country.

"I never expected Greece to be so quaint "My wife and I are going to love living here."



Souvlaki, grilled chicken and beef

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